

COMMENTARY

“Educational” advertisements—I haven’t seen one yet!

Since perestroika, Russians have been exposed to free-market advertising. Russian physicians are no exception, and pharmaceutical companies have rushed in with advertisements to fill the void in information on current drug therapies. The pharmaceutical industry has long argued that advertising and other promotional efforts can be educational. However, as Vlassov and colleagues show, pharmaceutical ads in Russian medical journals are characterized by a *lack* of information on indications, safety, drug interactions, and supporting resources. This is not surprising because pharmaceutical ads in the United States and other countries also have a poor record. Earlier studies have shown that drug ads contain misleading and incorrect information,¹ and this information is associated with inappropriate prescribing.² Herxheimer and colleagues examined drug ads from 18 countries and found that those from journals in developed and developing countries lacked essential information.³ Thus, advertisements in countries like Russia, where physicians are eager for educational information on new products, are no more informative than those in other countries.

One way that pharmaceutical companies could carry through on their promise to educate physicians would be to link ads to resources with more detailed information. In practice, however, advertisers respond to requests for additional information slowly or not at all.⁴ In addition, when supplemental technical information is provided, it is often from non-peer-reviewed, drug industry-sponsored studies.

Ads are only 1 aspect of drug promotion. Other promotional activities are even more likely to be disguised as education. The authors could do an interesting follow-up to their current study by assessing the types of promotional materials that are distributed to Russian physicians, such as journal reprints, pamphlets, and reminder items.

Although not labeled as advertisements, these materials also tend to be promotional rather than educational and often fail to convey important information about drugs.⁵

Why do researchers spend their time documenting that drug ads are incomplete, unbalanced, and inaccurate? Isn't it naive to ever expect that an advertisement, which focuses on a single product, can be educational? Studies such as this show that drug ads do not meet the standard put forth by the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association. Other studies have shown that drug ads also fail to meet the standards required by regulatory bodies such as the Food and Drug Administration or advisory organizations such as the World Health Organization.^{3,5} Thus, people who are exposed to drug ads must realize that voluntary and regulatory guidance has little influence on their content. As inaccuracies and unbalance in drug ads are exposed, physicians must learn to seek information elsewhere. By critically appraising drug ads, as well as other sources of information on drugs, physicians can use their time efficiently to keep up-to-date on drug therapies.

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capsule

The benefits of a good bedside manner

It's hard to be warm, caring, and friendly all the time, but there's evidence that people respond well to physicians with a good bedside manner. Authors of a meta-analysis published in the *Lancet* (2001;357:757-762) concluded that outcomes in patients with chronic diseases such as hypertension are generally better when the doctor is positive and reassuring, although the effects are small.